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ABSTRACT

Through this review of literature, the economic attitudes and patterns in ancient Egypt are interpreted. The paper also explains the economic ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers and of Jesus of Nazareth. It observes that societal deterioration, prompted by economic-focused pursuits and different societal interpretations, may occur based on economic status. The need to consider these differences in curricula development is recognized and recommendations for their improvement is provided. (Contains 44 references.) (Author/BT)

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Of the Egyptians, Ancient Greeks, Jesus and Teaching Personal Economics in Grades K-12

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Association of Multicultural Education
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Abstract

Through this review of literature, the author interprets the economic attitudes and patterns in Ancient Egypt. He also explains the economic ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers and of Jesus of Nazareth. The author observes that societal deterioration prompted by economic-focused pursuits and that different societal interpretations that may occur based on economic status. He recognizes the need to consider these differences in curricula development and provides recommendations for their improvement.

Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce Census Bureau (2002), the United States experiences ongoing multicultural economic disparity. This growing disparity is indicated by the widening income gap between rich and poor and by the general inequitable wealth ownership patterns along ethnic lines (U.S. Department of Commerce Census Bureau, 1986, 1990, December 13, 2000, April 9, 2001).

Part of this disparity may result from the poor financial literacy of our youth. Studies show that high school and elementary school children generally possess low understandings of income, money management, spending and credit, and savings and investment tenets (Jumpstart Coalition, 1997, 2000, 2002; Lucey, 2002). Children mostly learn about financial practices at home (American Savings Education Council (ASEC), 1999; Jumpstart Coalition, 1997, 2000, 2002; Lucey, 2002).

In our multiculturally modern context, children inherit both financial resources and the practices for managing them (Conley, 2001). As objective as economic laws may appear, it is possible that social contexts affect subjective economic realities that individuals experience. Amos Tversky and Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman (1983) demonstrated the differences between common perceptions and factual information. Just as Vygotsky (1978) theorized historical contexts for learning and Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized environmental learning systems, it is very possible that historical and developmental factors influence economic learning processes and associated economic-related perceptions.

While research does not appear to have specifically investigated the idea of perceptions related to economic contexts, evidence exists to suggest relationships between economic conditions and psychological conditions. For example, Phelan and Schvaneveldt (1969) found significant

relationships between self-perceptions of children and siblings' spending and savings patterns. Hira and Mugenda (1999) observed that financial satisfaction, financial expectations, and lack of financial worries predict positive self-worth in adults. Taylor and Overbey (1999) found young adults were overly optimistic of their own economic circumstances when compared to objective interpretations; they also found relationships between financial attitudes and interpersonal perceptions. Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, and Tagier (2001) discovered group perceptions of college students involved economic associations. These studies suggest that economic differences may result from perceptual differences. It is quite possible that our financial practices may reflect our societal and personal values.

If economic patterns mirror processes of value or character patterns, then ethical research may provide some study direction. MacIntyre (1984) challenged the ethical community to consider that ethical theory lacked meaning outside historical contexts. He identified three characteristics to moral debates: positions with premises only criticizable in historical contexts; objective arguments based on subjective premises; and differently defined terms from different historic contexts. By tracing the history of European ethical theory, MacIntyre (1984) observed that modern society distorted the heroic and classical Greek understanding of personal virtues. Astutely, MacIntyre (1988) observed his review was incomplete because he only considered European ethical history, not ethical histories of other cultures.

A multicultural capitalist society that experiences economic disparities must recognize that societal challenges are associated with economics-based personal perceptions. To investigate such possibilities, I review perceptions associated with foundational societies and philosophical influences. Tracing the development of Ancient Egypt, its internal processes and external contacts, I develop a conceptualization of systemic societal and economic relationships. I then consider how

economic status affected societal perceptions by reviewing the interpretations of the classical Greek philosophers and of Jesus of Nazareth. Finally, I relate findings to conditions in modern educational settings, providing suggestions for curriculum and research.

Archaic Egypt

Most literature about archaic Egyptian cultures resulted from archeological research. Between 10,000 and 5,000 BCE hunter-gatherer and fish catching populations in the Nile Valley interfaced with peoples from the Fertile Crescent area and distinguished themselves from each other by their form of subsistence (Hayes, 1965). Thus, cultures determined different worth of people by their food-gathering processes.

From 5,000-3,000 BCE these groups attempted to irrigate agricultural land immediately around the Nile through community agreement between political and political-religious groups (Vercoutter, 1981). Tomb construction and tomb contents provided evidence that craft specialization, labor division, and social complexities existed in Gerzean-Egyptian culture around 3,500 BCE (Trigger, 1982).

A social order may have existed within these societies. Tribal group chiefs were believed to have important roles due to their perceived magic/religious powers (Trigger, 1982; Vercoutter, 1981). Eventually a unified state developed which was divided into provinces (nomes) or human groups. This organization facilitated an economic environment that "exploited the country...more effectively" (Vercoutter, 1981, p. 719). This unified state prompted an exchange system of taxes and labor from the people for protection by the government, where such a process did not occur in similarly environed cultures of that time (Trigger, 1982).

Pharaonic Egypt

Old kingdom. Society in the Old Kingdom appeared to be a cooperative system based on societal function. Pharaonic society may not have involved rigid societal classes, as the pharaoh could send a person "back to the land" as a discipline measure (Vercoutter, 1981). However, Yoyotte (1981) wrote that wealth and land became associated with bureaucratic hierarchy. Increasing provisions for funerary purposes (Aldred, 1984) provided evidence that the pharaoh and priests received economic favor through tax exemptions in honor of "the gods", enabling wealth development for those controlling the surplus.

The society used no money, as everyone belonged to organizations that supplied the members' needs (Vercoutter, 1981). The economic system contained no bourgeoisie and experienced rare "middleman" aside from commercial agents of the pharaoh or temples (Yoyotte, 1981).

The society's cooperative existence did not last, as a power struggle in the wealthy upper class increased the power of great nomal chiefs during the last dynasties of the Old Kingdom (Kemp, 1982; Yoyotte, 1981). Royal officials were no longer relatives of the pharaoh, and rivalries for power developed as positions became based on inheritance. The upper class became competitive and the image of the divine king eventually failed (Aldred, 1961).

Bell (1971) pointed out that towards the end of the Old Kingdom, a long draught period adversely affected grain production. It may be argued that because of the competition for wealth and power, Egypt was not prepared for the draught it experienced. Bell (1971) remarked that existing hieroglyphs did not contain direct criticisms of the pharaohs, as writing was a skill for the elite during that period. The writings generally involved positive expressions of events. It is possible the absence of criticism may simply represent the elite's deliberate neglect to document

administrative failures and shortcomings. The writings may only have conveyed the elite's interpretation of events. Without additional information, it is difficult to objectively anticipate what members of the lower class might have written had they possessed the proper skills.

It is possible the draught exacerbated developing political competitions and conflicts. As the pharaohs' power and wealth transferred to the lords, the lords became competitive, and a complacency toward the community (as a whole) developed. This complacency then prompted the neglect of surplus preservation efforts, weakening their preparedness for the draught emergency.

Middle kingdom. The Middle Kingdom witnessed efforts to reorganize the administration processes, but lacked the peaceful security experienced in the Old Kingdom (Aldred, 1961). In this period slaves became societal participants as the human spoils of war. While the high offices bought and sold personal property to increase personal wealth, an economic schism reemerged between the king and the people (Aldred, 1961; Yoyotte, 1981). The Middle Kingdom slowly declined as the pharaohs began to delegate governmental duties more to the viziers and chancellors (Aldred, 1961).

New kingdom. The New Kingdom witnessed pharaohs' efforts to address political corruption and national security (Bakr, 1981). During this period, the internal government function maintained and enhanced the agricultural economy, while maintaining societal attitudes and needs. While a middle class developed and provided contact between the upper and lower classes, the society's hierarchical structure contained social economic divisions based on occupation (O' Connor, 1982). Nevertheless, minor craftsmen and unskilled workers were socially dependent on others (Aldred, 1961). The middle and lower classes possessed little political influence except when this order was disrupted (O'Connor, 1982). Still, an element of compassion for the lower classes existed, as the Egyptians respected farm labor because they understood the processes

(Aldred, 1961). This compassion did not prompt land ownership; Herodotus did not describe any freeman farmers in this society, as the government temples owned all the land (O'Connor, 1982).

Class distinctions occurred on educational as well as economic lines (Aldred, 1961). Civil service recruits had a moral code that involved a "scorn for commonality", yet this code also involved good intentions and respect for social order (Yoyotte, 1981). Evidence of compassion for the lower classes existed, however. The code prescribed that "...If poor cultivator is in arrears with his taxes, remit 2/3rds of them" (Aldred, 1961, p.180). While disdain for the economically disadvantaged existed, cooperation was necessary for societal cohesion.

Pharaonic Egypt experienced the development and decline of a storage and redistribution system where the upper class traded the surplus to increase personal power and wealth (Trigger, Kemp, O'Connor, & Lloyd, 1983). During this period, urban and rural lives were undistinguishable (O'Connor, 1982).

As the upper class grew wealthy and the middle class developed, the society experienced internal and external challenges, in part prompted by climate changes. A possible reason for Pharaonic society's longevity may have involved self-understanding. The Egyptians "understood tensions and conflicts threatening their social stability" (O'Connor, 1982, p. 844). However, the elite's focus on personal wealth accumulation and on protection more than societal redistribution prompted rivalries for power and societal disruption. These conditions left society vulnerable to Greek conquer.

Hellenistic Egypt

Egyptian society changed greatly under Greek control. The upper levels of government were filled entirely with Greeks and no efforts to relate Egyptians to the new culture occurred

(Law, 1978). The new social order depended on specialization, rather than function (Bowman, 1986).

The Hellenistic pharaohs (Ptolemies) did not coordinate economic production with the Egyptians; they seized products from the treasury, and created discriminatory policies against the indigenous Egyptians (Law, 1978). The oppressive ruling processes prompted six economic problems: Egyptian cultivation hardships, declining rural population, ptolemist land maintenance problems, irrigation process decays, and tri-metallic currency inflation (Law, 1978). Soon after the revolt of 217 B.C.E., the Greeks increasingly sought Roman intervention for economic and political problems (Law, 1978; Riad, 1981), and eventually passed control to Rome by 30 B.C.E.

Roman Egypt

Roman Egypt witnessed similar societal relationships to Hellenistic Egypt, as the indigenous people did not benefit from the new system. Under Roman government, Egypt completed the transition from a rural to an urban based society where "only the wealthy...really participated in this culture." (Bagnall, 1993, p. 99). The Egyptians paid taxes, but Greek and Roman citizens were exempt (Bagnall, 1993; Bowman, 1986). In this setting, private economic relationships, official structures, and religious hierarchies combined to create societal class structures (Bagnall, 1993). The Roman government, lead by an appointed prefect, included honorary magistrates who were elected by the landowners (Bagnall, 1993). Thus economic status provided control opportunities putting wealthy Greeks and Romans in legal favor (Bagnall, 1993).

Summary of Egypt

The nature of Early Egyptian societies involved an ordering of each other and their leaders; however, evidence of wealth distinction did not appear until the division of labor and specialization

occurred. This economic value judgment appeared to be a basic individual and social thought process.

The economic discrimination process involved at least two dimensions. First, it involved an inter-societal dimension that involved one class level over another that was observed in all Egyptian societies. Second, it involved an intra-societal dimension where one culture imposed its values over another. The inter-societal economic relationship began as a cooperative process. However, as the wealthy upper class controlled the surplus for longer periods, economic and social processes to retain such control persisted. Such processes included a code of poor attitudes and expectations about the lower classes.

Economics represented a systemic discriminatory basis that prompted societal deterioration in Ancient Egypt. Wealth was pursued for personal gain, rather than for societal well-being. To clarify societal interpretations based on societal class, I now describe the views of the Ancient Greek philosophers and of Jesus of Nazareth.

Ancient Greece

The well-known philosophers of Ancient Greece were members of the upper classes (Pomeroy, 1994). MacIntyre (1988) explained how Plato's *Republic* described the structure and content of societal theory, but its foundation was paradoxical. Aristotle provided a *telos* or direction to Plato's theories of the *Republic*. He theorized citizens realized their own good, as prescribed by their context in a city-state or *polis* (MacIntyre, 1988). According to Aristotle, there was not a standard for ethical conduct outside of the *polis*.

Aristotle held that financial management involved exercising the mean of "liberality" between the extremes of "prodigality" and "meanness" (Hadreas, 2002). This mean involved a

practical lifestyle, an avoidance of extremes, a pleasure absent the extremes, and a moral education on training of control of feelings (Hadreas, 2002).

Hadreas (2002) wrote that in Ancient Greek society, freeman required citizenry in a society where land ownership was family, not individual based. A man without a family did not have land rights. Aristotle saw gathering money in, and of itself, as unnatural (Hadreas, 2002), possibly because he developed within this context of understanding land ownership. Reportedly Aristotle disliked financiers because their occupation prompted what I call "financial enslavement". Ironically, Aristotle's allowance for social classes (MacIntyre, 1988) included slavery, and appeared contrary to this perception. It is possible that Aristotle's just war concept overlooked the possibility that war involved economic motives and economic enslavements.

Xenophon. Through his experiences from outside Athens, Xenophon provided a societal interpretation that Plato and Aristotle lacked (Pomeroy, 1994). Through his *Oeconomicus*, Xenophon identified wealth "as any good thing one possesses" (Pomeroy, 1994, p. 105), yet qualified that value may be a subjective concept. Xenophon considered wealth a concept that varied between people, and considered immorality as its universal hindrance.

Xenophon explained farming processes to demonstrate his ideas on estate management, because he believed farming represented the basis for a successful society. The critical element for successful farming was a functionally cooperative family, where the husband and wife represented an economically functional unit. The husband had responsibility for the income and the wife had responsibility for expenses and for estate protection. The measure of personal worth depended on actions, rather than income. Xenophon held that assets should be in a common fund, with the better partner determined by the more valuable contributions, rather than the most contributions.

Like Plato and Aristotle, Xenophon theorized that cooperative roles (including slavery) represented part of society. He offered a functional justification of the family unit focused on values rather than on wealth. Yet, as in Plato and Aristotle's interpretations, social roles existed in Xenophon's conceptualization. Societal members possessed functional duties within those contexts.

Summary of Greek perspectives. These three upper class classical Greek philosophers expressed theories involving different societal dynamics, yet consistently held that society contained duty bound roles for members to fulfill. The writings of the ancient Greek philosophers were those of the upper classes, however. There do not appear to be writings by the slaves or lower class that expressed their own ideas. To gain perspective of the ideas of the lower class, I consider the first century of the Common Era and the interpretations of what a member of the lower class had to say.

Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth was probably an illiterate peasant with great oratory skills who had great knowledge of society in general and of Jewish traditions specifically (Crossan, 1994). While it may be conjectured that Luke's gospels documented Jesus' literacy, Crossan and Reed (2001) noted that the literacy rates at that time were about 3 to 5%. Given Jesus' lower economic status, Crossan & Reed (2001) argued that Jesus was cognizant of Jewish traditions, but just could not read. Stories of Jesus' reading in the temple might have represented literary devices to parable Paul's experiences in Acts (Crossan & Reed, 2001) and the childhood dialogue in the temple may be an allegory responding to claimed childhood accomplishments of Roman leaders (Crossan, 1999).

Jesus challenged the societal order of his time and culture through his parables and his actions. He challenged the society that prompted economic differences and espoused "a radically

egalitarian society representing an absolute equity of people that denie(d) any discrimination between them and negate(d) the necessity of any hierarchy" (Crossan, 1994, p. 71).

Jesus was concerned with the societal destitute, not just the poor, because the destitute were the societal outcasts; they suffered the most from societal injustices (Crossan, 1994). His contact with the lepers was an economic message, as leprosy was not only a medical circumstance, but one involving material imperfections as well (Crossan, 1994). Torn clothing represented a social sign of indebtedness and ill social health; to be unclean involved being outcast by the wealthy (Crossan, 1994). Jesus recognized the unfairness and unjustness associated with greed-based societal interpretations.

Societal differences involved economic elements that distorted humanistic-based considerations of others. Jesus recognized that unless society could purge itself from its lust for material wealth and recognize humanistic-based worth, society had immediate vulnerabilities.

Conclusions

Early in societal development, economics represented a systemic source of discrimination that affected personal and societal interpretations. The process became evident in a surplus society as specialization and division of labor processes were established. These economic interpretations occurred between and within societies and between and within ethnic and racial communities as well.

Ancient Egypt provided evidence that economic based discriminatory processes prompted societal deterioration. When wealth was pursued as an end it obscured the understanding of societal good. Marked differences in perceptions of societal interpretations were evident between the perceptions of the upper societal class Greek philosophers and lower societal class Jesus. Economic

circumstances affected personal perceptions in the extreme, prompting neglect of human-based relationships.

Our population exhibits multicultural dimensions of financial ownership. As the federal government may well understate poverty levels (National Public Radio (NPR) the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, 2001) those populations with disproportionate percentages of impoverished members may not receive the support required for economic survival. In general, our multicultural populations of color might lack the skills and conditions to retain the income they earn (Conley, 2001). While cognitive learning processes may alleviate these disparities, they don't fully address the problem. This review of historical contexts and perceptions suggests that economic psychologies play important roles in these processes.

Implications for Educational Processes

In our early 21st century setting, economics education represents a multiculturally relevant issue because economically influenced perceptual differences underlie educational disparities today. Standardized testing bias, administration-teacher conflict, and technological resource allocation disparities represent manifestations of the economic bias that plague our educational system. Even school and district consolidation debates condense down to the affluent advocacy of Economies of Scale pitted against community calls for quality learning environments (Strang, 1987). Economic influenced perceptions challenge the equal education opportunities for students of different socio-economic backgrounds.

The No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) lacks the substance to be effective legislation towards improving personal economic learning because it does not provide any guidance for curriculum development. To be fully effective, given the tangible realities of our multicultural economic disparities, personal economics curriculums must address both

interpersonal and cognitive aspects of financial practices. Unless the act provides such curriculum direction, the economically disadvantaged lack the psychological wellness to practice economic content that may not relate to their life circumstances.

Within our educational systems, economic perceptions affect education contacts with educators, education contacts with students, and student contacts with students. To be effective, a multiculturally relevant educational process must recognize group and individual economic perceptual differences and model human-based behaviors for our children to follow.

Recommendations

The challenge of economic learning involves economic perceptions as well as economic understandings. John (1999) indicated that some adolescents might not possess the ability to develop consumer understandings to the degrees that their peers do. Based on the historical and modern research presented, I believe these differences involve environmental foundations that may develop from interpersonal perceptions and experiences.

Educators must commence dialogues involving economic perceptions and their influences on educational learning processes. Curriculum and instructional processes should involve environments upholding positive student perceptions, regardless of student economic status. To that end, the following recommendations are offered for improving curriculum processes.

- Include interpersonally relevant benchmarks in the existing four personal economic areas expressed in curriculum guidelines advocated by the Jumpstart Coalition.
- Utilize positive focused student centered learning environments that allow students success through discovery of economic relationships and encourage humanistic resolutions to economic conflicts.

- Adapt assessment processes that recognize individual economic learning differences and compensate for challenges accentuated by the standardized testing biases.
- Employ cooperative community oriented experiences that discover collective human worth independently from economic circumstances.

Economic-based perceptions play critical roles in prompting societal inequities. The educational process must assume a leadership posture to overcome this multicultural bias. For multicultural education processes to be systematically successful, educators must learn from the Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Jesus and undertake efforts to practice and teach cooperative humanistic economic values.

Note

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